
"Regenerating divine soundscapes or how to translate sound?"

by Frederik Lamote, IARA (Belgium)

ABSTRACT

Based on long term anthropological fieldwork in Techiman, a small historical city in central Ghana, this presentation explores the feasibility of an artistic project that intends to regenerate divine soundscapes in a spatially as well as culturally distinct context. It intends to launch a discussion on the feasibility of the project. During religious performance in Techiman, new Western gods take possession of the bodies of their priests and generate new rhythms and new choreographies to display their powers. The project anticipates on the suggestion of a possessed priest to replace the wooden drums by electronic instruments.



In its initial stages, this project wants to work with video montages and replace the original drumming with electronic soundscapes that bear close resemblance with the trancy atmosphere of the divine performances. As such, the project wants to transcend the often pejorative Western connotations of African Traditional religion, music and dance, and present the performance of the priests within the appropriate 'worlded' (Simone 2001) context. By merging together two seemingly incompatible worlds, a different image may be created. However, how can one regenerate a divine soundscape or how can sound be translated to a different context? Is this possible at all? And which ethical and intellectual obstacles need to be overcome?

ETHNOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

In an overarching context of globalization, religious change and rapid urbanization, the so-called Traditional¹ religion of the Techiman-Bono² is heavily pressured and contested. Due to the urbanization of Techiman³, the city encroaches on the surrounding forests, the cradle of the Traditional religion and the dwelling place of the local gods. Moreover, the influx of Islam and especially the proliferation of (Pentecostal) Christianity have thoroughly shaken up the religious landscape of Techiman. The mushrooming Pentecostal churches present themselves as a modern and global alternative for “the backward and demonic Traditional religion”⁴. Compared to the situation in the 1970’s (Warren 1973), the number of Traditional shrines decreased from a few hundreds to a dozens of active shrines and an uncountable number of ‘sleeping’ shrines in 2009.

However, in the verge of scandals in some Pentecostal churches⁵ and a wider wave of re-appreciation of ‘traditions’, new and old shrines re-emerge and their young priests create furor. Throughout time, Traditional priests adapted to the changing circumstances by relocating their shrines to the shifting edges of the city and by buying or catching traveling gods. Scrutinizing the histories of the shrines in Techiman and looking into the places of origin of their gods learns that the oldest gods stem from nearby natural landmarks like rivers (the Atano-gods⁶), rock formations and caves (the Boö gods). When these natural landmarks became affected by urbanization, the gods lost part of their aura of power. Hence, a new generation of gods was imported to address the apparent rise of witchcraft in the first part of the twentieth century (Field 1960; Goody 1957). These were the *abrafoo* or executioner gods, mostly stemming from Northern Ghana (Allman and Parker 2005; McCaskie 1981; McCaskie 2005; Parker 2004; Parker 2006). More recently, priests caught new traveling gods as a reaction to the rising popularity of the global and modern holy spirit. The youngest generations of gods are believed to originate from urban Africa and from so-called global cities such as Mumbai, London and New York. Together with the influx of foreign gods, Techiman

¹ I opt to write ‘Traditional’ with a capital letter since, in this context, it refers to a fully-fledged religion, just as one writes Islam or Christianity with a capital letter.

² The Bono are the indigenous ethnic group of Techiman.

³ The average growth rates of Techiman are far higher than the regional and national averages in Ghana (GSS 2005)

⁴ Bishop Yeboah of the ‘Nyame Te Ase’ (God is alive) church during a sermon in his church, Techiman, 12 Mai 2008

⁵ The Pentecostal movement represents a very broad and heterogenic group of Christian churches that are united by their belief in the holy spirit as the spiritual manifestation of the almighty god on earth. However, the mode and style of worship and the scale upon which the Pentecostal churches work vary greatly. Some Pentecostal churches deceived their congregation by using the very Traditional powers they demonised to extract money from the congregation. Check <http://www.modernghana.com/news/164235/1/kwaku-bonsam-dares-man-of-god.html> for more info.

⁶ Some of the Atano-gods are several hundreds years old and have played an important role in the pre-colonial as well as colonial history of the area now referred to as Ghana.

gods also migrated to Western cities such as Washington, London and Antwerp. So doing, they illustrate how the worlding of Techiman is reflected in the spiritual geography of the Traditional religion.

This artistic project anticipates on the worlding of the Traditional religion and appropriates its adaptability and transferability as artistic instruments. The project wants to work with the aural manifestation of the new Western gods in Techiman. Gods manifest themselves through their priests. They take possession of the body of their priests and display their powers in public performances with a high degree of entertainment. Through performing or coming-into-presence, gods dictate what their shrines should look like, how they want to be fashioned and -of crucial importance to this project- to which tunes and rhythms they like to dance. New gods create new rhythms and new choreographies. Depending on the character of the god, these range from relatively calm to very aggressive trance rhythms, accompanied by the corresponding dance performances. The soundscapes generated by the djembe-drummers create a unique trancy atmosphere within which the divine performance of the gods can be displayed.

During one of these performances, a Western god of one of the most notorious as well as famous Traditional priests in Ghana, Nana Kwaku Bonsam⁷, raised the idea to replace the wooden drums by electronic instruments. This project takes this aspiration seriously and, backed up by the presence of Traditional gods in Western cities and the ambition of many Traditional priests to perform in these cities, this project wants to create a transurban platform where different styles of (divine) soundscapes and choreographies can meet, merge and/or collide.

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⁷ Check his website for more info: <http://www.nanakwakubonsam.net>

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